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AUTHOR Batchelder, Ann
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ABSTRACT

Since 1984 the Navajo Nation has mandated instruction in Navajo language and culture in K-12 schools within its boundaries. In 1998-99, a survey and follow-up interviews with 48 individuals in 20 Navajo communities examined community attitudes and beliefs about the value of Navajo language and culture studies and the extent to which the schools should be involved in such instruction. Across the reservation, attitudes varied greatly with regard to which aspects of Navajo culture should be taught in school, who should be responsible for teaching Navajo language and culture, what level of Navajo fluency students should achieve, and how much of the school day should be devoted to Navajo language and culture. Respondents' attitudes were related to age, personal experience with schooling, and the size and location of the community in which they lived. Those who felt that schools should not teach language and culture were generally in one of three groups: elders and other traditionalists who felt that schools could not appropriately teach sensitive aspects of Navajo culture, those who thought that the role of school was to help the Navajo Nation move into the future, and those who did not trust the schools based on bad personal experiences. (SV)

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Teaching Diné Language and Culture in Navajo Schools: Voices from the Community

Ann Batchelder

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In 1984 the Navajo Nation mandated that all the Nation's schools make language and culture instruction part of the curriculum at all grade levels. This paper is based on an on-going study of how communities across the Navajo Nation are going about meeting this mandate. It draws on responses of community members to a survey and follow-up interviews that asked respondents to reflect on how language and cultural studies should be treated as a part of school instruction. This study included citizens of the Navajo Nation who are community members, parents, teachers, teacher assistants, and school administrators. Findings indicate that in communities across the reservation there are different beliefs about the nature and extent of what should be included in learning about Navajo language and culture in schools. There are also differences in beliefs about who should be involved in the teaching of culture and language. These beliefs seem to be tied to the size and location of communities, the age of the person, and individual experience with K-12 schooling.

Since 1984 the Navajo Nation has mandated instruction in Navajo language and culture in K-12 schools within its boundaries. There was a great concern then, and this concern still exists today, that fewer and fewer members of the Nation have access to their rich cultural and linguistic heritage. Clearly there is substance to these concerns. The National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education (1999) reports that there are 148,530 speakers of Navajo in a Nation of 250,000 to 275, 000 people (statistics on the population of the Nation vary by source). A study conducted by Paul Platero of children in reservation Head Start Programs in the early 1990s found that of the three- to five-year old children included in the study only 18% spoke Navajo (Watchman, 1994). Agnes Holm and Wayne Holm (1995) reported that only about half the students attending schools on the reservation still spoke Navajo. From another perspective, James Crawford (1995) found that between 1980 and 1990 the number of Navajos who are monolingual English speakers grew to about 15% of the Nation's population.

The loss of language is closely tied to a loss of culture. As Jon Reyhner points out: "Our languages contain a significant part of the world's wisdom. When a language is lost, much of the knowledge that language represents is lost" (1996, p. 4). Joshua Fishman concurs:

> The most important relationship between language and culture that gets to the heart of what is lost when you lose a language is that most of the culture is in the language and is expressed in the language. Take it

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> away from the culture, and you take away its greetings, its curses, its praises, its laws, its literature, its songs, its riddles, its proverbs, its cures, its wisdom, its prayers. The culture could not be expressed and handed on in any other way.... That is, you are losing all those things that essentially are the way of life, the way of thought, the way of valuing, and the human reality that you are talking about. (1996, p. 81)

The Navajo Nation Education Policies (Navajo Tribe, 1984) targeted schools as agencies to foster the development of Navajo language and culture. As part of an ongoing study that examines the ways in which reservation schools are attempting to meet this mandate, this paper discusses concerns of Navajo teachers and community members about the role that schools should play in fostering Navajo language and culture.

Background of the study

In 1997, a written survey asking some basic questions about what should be included in Navajo culture and language studies in K-12 reservation schools was conducted in communities across the reservation (Batchelder & Markel, 1997). The Navajo Nation covers a vast territory that includes parts of Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah. Reservation communities in each of these states participated in the survey as well as members of the Navajo tribe that reside outside reservation boundaries in places such as Albuquerque, Farmington, and Santa Fe in New Mexico and Flagstaff, Phoenix, and Holbrook in Arizona. The 150 respondents for this survey were parents, community members, teachers, teacher assistants, and other school employees.

The initial survey found that there was strong support for including Navajo language and culture studies in schools; however, there was not agreement as to what the nature and extent of these studies should be. To follow up on this initial survey, a second phase of the study was done. In this second phase, 48 participants from 20 Navajo communities filled out the survey and then were individually interviewed about their responses from May 1998 to September 1999. Follow-up interviews typically took place the same day that participants completed the survey. Some respondents to the original survey were included in this second phase of the study as well as others who filled out surveys after the initial study was completed. All the participants in this second phase of the study were members of the Navajo Nation. They represent the same wide range of communities and classifications—parents, community members, teachers, teacher assistants, and so forth—as those who participated in the original survey.

As follow-up interviews took place, it became clear that while education for the Nation's children was an extremely important issue to all who participated in this study, there were several important demographic and personal characteristics that tended to color each participant's beliefs about the value of Navajo language and culture studies. These characteristics can be broken down into the following categories: age, personal school history, where the participant grew up, the present community of residence, and the location of that community.

The responses to questions on each of the following four topics are discussed below along with how demographic and personal characteristics of the respondents shaped their answers:

- What aspects of Navajo culture should be included in instruction?
- Who should be responsible for teaching language and culture?
- How fluent in the Navajo language should students become?
- To what extent should the school day be devoted to these kinds of studies?

What aspects of Navajo culture should be included in instruction?

To the majority of the participants this was a very sensitive question. A large number believe that Navajo religion and ceremonies are not appropriate subjects in any school's curriculum. Elders and others who follow closely Navajo traditions felt that the teaching of culture, particularly those aspects that are religious or ceremonial in nature, did not belong in schools. They thought that these are things that must be passed on to the next generation by family and community members. Many of the key tenets of living in beauty and in harmony are things that are not discussed openly even with close family members. From this perspective, no aspects of the Navajo culture should be "taught" in the way that schools "teach."

There were also study participants, mostly young and from outside the reservation or living in large towns on the reservation, who believed that teaching Navajo culture is not a good use of school time. These participants in their late teens and early twenties felt that teaching the traditional beliefs would not help the Navajo Nation move into the future—a future that depends on communication outside the reservation. If people want to learn about their heritage, it is something that they should pursue on their own. They tended to express the view that schools are to help students get into college or get jobs that bring money into the community in order to make the Nation stronger economically.

One other group of participants indicated that Navajo language and culture has no place in school. This stance was based upon their personal history with schools. Participants in this category do not trust the schools to teach their children about such things as Navajo language or culture. In their experiences schools are places that try to strip students of their Navajo heritage. They tended to think that giving schools responsibility for *helping* Navajo children learn about their culture and to speak their language is dangerous and could only lead to failure in preserving the language and culture.

At the other end of the spectrum there were an equally large number of participants who believed that the study of Navajo culture has some place in schools. For those living in smaller communities in the central part of the reservation and not directly connected to major roads there was agreement that while religion and ceremonies are not appropriate for inclusion in school studies, traditional stories (if taught within the proper season of the year), Navajo history, and the clan system can be included in the school curriculum. These participants also felt that it was important for students to understand respect for elders, re-

spect for traditions, the means for properly addressing others, and how to speak properly to others. They expressed the belief that schools could help children to learn these things.

Another group composed primarily of parents and teachers not living in their original communities suggested that, if nothing else, students should learn about the clan system and some of the more important events in Navajo history. A few suggest that this could be done as part of a special month set aside for Navajo studies or as a unit that would be part of the existing curriculum in history or social studies courses at designated grade levels.

Who should be responsible for teaching Navajo language and culture?

While this is not as sensitive an issue as the first question, participants had very strong opinions about who should be instructing students about language and culture. Again, there is a wide range of responses. At one end, elders, community members who did not work at schools, and those from smaller communities believed that the best instructors for teaching both language and culture are Navajo elders who are community members. These participants felt that those who would traditionally teach outside of school are also the best choice to instruct students within the school.

Another group of participants representing most reservation communities, including Indian teachers and some older community members, hold that the most important characteristic for an instructor is that the person is Navajo and a member of that community. These instructors can be teaching assistants, community members, or special instructors as long as they are part of the community in which the school is located.

The emphasis on membership in the community for this group cannot be stated too strongly. Two Navajo teachers who participated in interviews said that they would be looking for other jobs because of the criticism they had received from parents and other community members about teaching Navajo language and culture in their own classrooms. Neither of these teachers had grown up in the community in which they were teaching. Both had been directly confronted by parents and other community members about their "right" to teach language and culture to community children. Neither one wished to stay at a school in which they felt they were not welcome.

On the opposite end of the continuum on this issue was a group of participants that represents residents of large reservation communities, communities on the south and east edges of the reservation, and those who live off the reservation. This group believed that the most important characteristic for Navajo language and culture instructors is that they be certified teachers. To the majority of these people it does not matter if the instructor is Navajo or not. Holding a degree is more important. Several of the participants from this group reported that the person in charge of language and culture instruction at their school was non-Indian. Many also indicated that the certified teacher, regardless of their ethnic background, who has full charge of a classroom should be the person responsible for language and culture instruction.

In the middle of this continuum was a group of participants, mostly parents in their thirties, who were not really sure who should be responsible for Navajo language and culture instruction. Some members of this group indicated that the choice of instructor would depend on the grade level of the students—some feel that elementary age students need Navajo instructors, while at the secondary level this is not as important. Others felt exactly the opposite—it really does not matter who instructs younger children, it is the older children who need Indian role models.

The last group of participants were those who indicated in the first question that the schools have no place teaching language or culture because of the nature of schools. These participants strongly believed that the only way students will learn Navajo is by learning and using it within the community, not within schools. For this group, schools are seen as places that focus on obliterating any trace of Indian culture. They believe that culture and language are the responsibility of the parents, elders, and other community members who have traditionally taught these things.

How fluent in Navajo language should students become?

The responses to this question are divided almost exactly equally into three categories, and each of the categories seems to represent the type of community that the participants live in. Those who believe that fluency in Navajo should be the goal of a Navajo language program are from smaller and more isolated communities. Communication in Navajo outside the school setting is common in these communities, and community members want their children to be able to become fluent speakers in order to participate in all aspects of community life.

Those who favored competency, defined here as the ability to carry on simple conversations in Navajo, generally represent middle-sized communities across the reservation. Several of the respondents wanted children and grandparents to be able to communicate with each other. In several of these communities there are some places in which Navajo is spoken, but fluency in Navajo is not felt by these respondents to be necessary for conducting daily life. Many of these participants thought that, while fluency in Navajo would be ideal, it is unrealistic to expect all children to become fluent native speakers.

In off-reservation communities, many communities bordering the reservation, and some large reservation communities on major highways, knowing the basics of the Navajo language is felt to be sufficient. Basics, in this case, mean the ability to label places, people, animals, and objects and to be able to greet and bid farewell in Navajo. There are a large group of parents and young adults in this group who emphasized that learning English is more important for students to become successful in life than learning Navajo. Three participants in this group had moved their families out of their home communities to other places where English language instruction is a strong component of the curriculum. They felt that this move was necessary in order to give their children a better chance for future success.

To what extent should the school day be devoted to Navajo?

Those participants who felt schools are not the place to teach language and culture indicated that no school time should be devoted to these endeavors. Other participants were not so decisive. For many of the participants, the answers to this series of questions brought out more feelings about the relationship of schools to the community and the purpose of schooling in general than pat answers to "how much" and "how often."

There were a number of study participants who felt that the instruction of every school subject, every day, should be focused on making the Navajo Nation stronger. This group is composed of members that cut across the age and location categorization created by the first three questions. It included elders, traditional people from small communities, teachers from schools across the reservation, and those that live off-reservation, particularly in large cities. Some of these people want to see Navajo language and culture become a component of every class in every subject area. Others felt that a portion of every school day should be devoted specifically to instruction in Navajo language and culture as specific study areas. The objective here is not only to promote preservation of language and culture but to shift the purpose of all schooling to the advancement of a Navajo-focused school curriculum.

Another group of participants, who represented larger reservation communities and those on the southern, western, and eastern edges of the reservation, tended to see language and culture instruction as more of a "sometimes thing." Many participants in this group felt that setting aside time for instruction, particularly language instruction, at the elementary level was essential. Past lower elementary grades, however, language instruction could be conducted in twice-a-week sessions till the end of grammar school. After that, students should be able to continue Navajo language studies as an elective. Cultural studies, for this group, would be best combined with existing social studies classes, with certain grade levels designated for in-depth Navajo cultural studies.

The rest of the responses about how instruction should be conducted in schools cannot be easily categorized. One person wanted to see every Friday become a *Navajo Language and Culture Day* at both the elementary and secondary levels. Several elders and residents from smaller communities wanted to see specific times during the school day allocated to studying Navajo language and culture so that children could go to designated places in the community—such as senior citizen centers and homes of elders—in an attempt to link schools and communities in the learning process.

Conclusions

While the Navajo Language and Culture Mandate is designed to bring Navajo language and culture studies to reservation schools, success for this effort will require an understanding of the individual characteristics of schools and communities across the reservation. Results of this study indicate that not all members of the Navajo Nation share the same beliefs about how their children

should be educated in regard to Navajo language and culture. As Barbara Burnaby (1996) points out, this lack of shared beliefs seriously undermines the chances for success for any school-based efforts at promoting Indigenous languages and cultures.

From the information gathered in this study, the size and location of communities seems to have an impact on the kinds of language and culture studies that communities will support. The larger the community and the closer a community is to major roads or the border of the reservation, the more likely Navajo language and culture studies are treated as academic subjects. Conversely, the smaller, more rural, and more traditional a community is, the more likely Navajo language and culture studies are viewed as a lifeline to cultural preservation.

Age and educational experiences of participants also play a significant role in the types of programs that are advocated for schools. Younger members of the Nation who were interviewed had a very different idea of the purpose for schooling than did elders or those from more traditional communities. Younger Navajos want schools to move the Nation into the future and view schools as a means to connect the reservation to outside cultures. Elders hope that schools can help school-aged children make the connections to traditions they feel are quickly slipping away.

Navajos whose schooling was directed toward erasing traces of Navajo language and culture do not see K-12 schools as a place to trust with culture and language studies. These people, who in this study range in age from their late twenties to early sixties, see schools as separate from the community, pointing children away from traditions rather than toward them. This group feels that schools only hasten the process of cultural extinction.

It appears that if the Navajo Nation is to continue to rely on schools to help preserve its linguistic and cultural heritage, then more than one model of how to make this partnership successful needs to be acknowledged. Fishman (1989) advocates that to preserve language and culture a society must begin with the home, then build through the community, and continue moving outward to achieve success. For the Navajo Nation this means inserting schools somewhere in this process. From the responses of the participants in this study, embedding schools more firmly inside Navajo and other indigenous communities as has been recommended by Stephen May (1999) may be the key to success.

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